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ABSTRACT

This is a follow-up study of clients seen at the Inter-University Psychological and Counseling Center during the 1968-1969 academic year. The instrument used was the Counseling Services Assessment Blank; 59% of the clients returned the questionnaire. Three questions were investigated: Are there differences in satisfaction among clients with problems which are primarily educational-vocational and personal problems? Is client satisfaction related to training and experience of the counselor? Is client satisfaction related to amount of time spent in counseling? Results indicated: (1) greater satisfaction for the clients with personal problems, rather than educational-vocational problems; (2) no significant differences in satisfaction dependent on the training and experience of the counselor; and (3) length of time in counseling and satisfaction were found to be significantly correlated for the clients with personal problems, but not for the educational-vocational choice clients. (Author)

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Client Satisfaction with Counseling as a Function of Type of Problem, Training and Experience of Counselor, and Duration of Counseling

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No other campus organization is more subject to public opinion than is the counseling facility. In most instances, its very existence is dependent upon the voluntary demand for services by both students and faculty.

The valuation a client makes of his counseling experience may have far reaching and long lasting effects both upon himself and upon the counseling center. His conceptions determine whether he will return, and these opinions frequently are a deciding factor in whether another student seeks help. The willingness of the university community to use the services provided by the counseling center will be determined by attitudes held toward the facility.

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Therefore, the importance of assessing client reaction to the services received has been repeatedly emphasized (Form, 1953; O'Dea & Zeran, 1953; Shoben, 1953; Grigg & Goodstein, 1957; Patterson, 1958; Goodstein & Grigg, 1959; Glazer, 1960, 1969; Pohlman & Robinson, 1960; Linden, Stone & Shertzer, 1965; Gabbert, Ivey, & Miller, 1967; Burck, 1969).

While it is recognized that client satisfaction is not a sufficient criterion for the assessment of counseling effectiveness, it is an important factor in any comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of counseling services. It is essential that counselors know the prevailing attitudes toward them and their services in order to function effectively. In this respect the value of obtaining indices of client reaction is obvious.

Client satisfaction is a complex variable, dependent in part upon the expectations of the client (Bordin, 1955; Patterson, 1958; Goodstein & Grigg, 1959; Isard & Sherwood, 1964; Gladstein, 1969) and the type of problem he brings to counseling (Gabbert, Ivey, & Miller, 1967; Weigel, Cochenour, & Russell, 1967).

Duration of counseling as it relates to success or outcome has been studied for several reasons. Economic and practical considerations as well as time limitations are obvious. In addition, counseling which is unnecessarily long may have no benefit for the client, and it may even hamper his development (Tyler, 1960). However, several

investigators (Cartwright, 1955; Taylor, 1956; Standal & Van der Veen, 1957; Cartwright, Robertson, Fiske, & Kirtner, 1961) have studied the relationship between length of counseling and success or outcome, and have, in general, observed a moderate trend toward greater success for longer cases.

Citing different findings, Frank (1969) states that although there is an emphasis in the literature on long-term therapy, most clients are seen for fewer than ten sessions. This suggests that the main function of counseling is to help the client recover his emotional equilibrium.

Several researchers have studied the relationship between counseling techniques and the experience level or training background of the counselor (Strupp, 1955; Grigg, 1961; Demos & Zuwaylif, 1963). Grigg (1961) studied client response to counselors at different levels of experience and concluded that "although counseling behaviors are reported to differ between the experienced and inexperienced therapist, there are no differences in clients' reports of favorableness of outcome of counseling by experienced or by inexperienced counselors (p. 222)." These findings are consistent with the growing body of evidence which suggests that the outcome of counseling may be more closely related to personal characteristics of the counselor than to his technical background, training, or experience (Rogers, 1965;

Truax & Carkhuff, 1965; Arbuckle, 1968). After reviewing the literature concerning counselor experience and therapeutic outcome, Strupp and Bergin (1969) conclude that "...it remains to be demonstrated how experience and its dimensions heighten therapeutic competence (p. 36)."

The present study is an investigation of clients' perceptions of a counseling center and the services it provides. The study developed from a natural curiosity about how the facility comes across to its clientele and a desire to improve or modify the existing program in order to be most serviceable and beneficial to the student body.

Although this research was conceived to be a descriptive study assessing the over-all satisfaction of clients with their counseling experience and the services rendered by the counseling center, three major hypotheses were tested. The first hypothesis stated that client satisfaction is related to the type of problem brought to the center. The second hypothesis that client satisfaction is a function of the training and experience of the therapist was included because of a question raised by another department concerning the ethicality and effectiveness of using practicum students as counselors. The third hypothesis that there is a relationship between the duration of counseling and satisfaction with counseling was tested to provide data for

the staff which is considering an arbitrary "time-limited" counseling approach.

Method

The subjects were the total population (N=349) of clients who received services and who were terminated from the Interuniversity Psychological and Counseling Center (serving students, employees, and dependents of Vanderbilt University and George Peabody College) between September 1, 1968 and August 31, 1969. Two major groups constituted the sample: clients who received individual and/or group counseling (N=223) and clients who participated in reading improvement classes (N=126). Those who received counseling and also attended the reading classes were treated as counseling clients for the purpose of data analysis.

The instrument used was the Counseling Services Assessment Blank (CSAB) published by Hurst and Weigel (1968). It is a one page questionnaire consisting of 27 items. Two additional items to be used in other research were stapled to the bottom of the questionnaire. Following several questions concerning biographical data, subjects are asked to rank the cause and the reason for their coming to counseling. Another item asked the subject to rank order the type of concerns primarily dealt with by the counseling center. The bulk of the questionnaire consisted

of 16 items, each in the form of a 5-point Likert-type scale assessing satisfaction with services and personal growth subsequent to their contact with the counseling center. There are two free response items. One asks for other campus facilities thought to offer services similar to those of the counseling center, and the other simply asks if there is anything else the subject wishes to tell.

For each subject a measure of satisfaction was obtained by summing the point value of each of his responses and dividing by the total number of responses he made. This concept of mean item response or mean satisfaction score was necessary since not all questionnaire items were applicable to any single subject, and consequently there was great variability in the number of responses made by different subjects.

Table 1 presents data on the number of items responded to by the subjects. Pearson Product-moment correlations between the number of items responded to and the satisfaction expressed were nonsignificant, thus indicating that there was no relationship between the number of items to which a subject responded and his mean satisfaction score.

Insert Table 1 about here

A questionnaire was mailed to each of the 349 subjects. A cover letter describing the research and emphasizing its

importance and a stamped, self-addressed envelope were included with the questionnaire. The first follow-up letter was mailed as a reminder after one week. At the end of the second week the second follow-up letter was mailed with another questionnaire and stamped, self-addressed envelope. The seven day interval was recommended (Robin, 1965) to promote maximum response.

Additional information such as the experience level of the therapist and, whenever possible, data missing from the questionnaire was obtained from the client's permanent counseling folder.

Results

Questionnaires were mailed to 349 former clients. The total response was 238 or 68 per cent. Of the subjects who responded, 207 (59%) returned scorable questionnaires.

The greatest return (47%) was in response to the third mailing. Twenty-five per cent and 28 per cent of the questionnaires were received after the first and second mailings respectively. From the data it appears that those subjects holding the least favorable and more extreme viewpoints tended to delay mailing their reactions. The responses to the third mailing were not only the most numerous, but also the most variable. The mean satisfaction score obtained

from questionnaires received following the first mailing was the highest, and client reactions were most homogeneous. The response to the second mailing fell at the middle for both mean satisfaction and variability. Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation for the satisfaction score obtained from each time period.

Although the per cent of response was approximately the same for clients participating in the reading improvement program (55%) and the clients receiving counseling (60%), an analysis of variance revealed a significantly slower rate of response ($p < .05$) for the reading improvement clients (M=2.40 weeks). Table 2 shows that when subjects who received counseling were separated into groups of clients receiving individual or group counseling for personal problems, it was found that the Educational-Career clients returned their questionnaires more quickly (M=1.97 weeks) than did those subjects in the Personal problems group (M=2.18 weeks). These differences were tested by an F test and found to be significant at the .05 level of confidence.

Insert Table 2 about here

An analysis of variance revealed that the mean number of items responded to for each group were significantly different at the .01 level of confidence. The mean number

of item responses and the standard deviation for each group is presented in Table 2.

Table 3 lists the mean satisfaction scores and the standard deviations obtained from the total sample and also from specified sub-groups. The mean satisfaction score reported for the total sample was 3.40. Responses were reported on a 5-point Likert-type scale where 1 represented a negative evaluation and 5 represented a positive evaluation. A standard deviation of .789 indicates that client reactions to counseling were rather variable.

Insert Table 3 about here

In terms of mean satisfaction scores, the Personal group expressed greater satisfaction (M=3.54) with their counseling experiences than did either the Educational-Career counseling clients (M=3.30) or the reading program participants (M=3.24). The significance of these differences was tested by an F test and found to be significant at the .05 level of confidence. Thus the test of the first hypothesis indicated that there were differences in satisfaction among clients based on the type of presenting problem.

The second hypothesis that there is no relationship

between expressed satisfaction and the training and experience of the counselor was tested by a simple randomized analysis of variance. Table 4 lists the mean satisfaction scores and standard deviations for practicum students, counseling fellows, interns, and professional staff members. Differences are slight and non-significant. The number of counselors in each experience-level group and the number of clients seen by each group are also shown in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 about here

The third hypothesis stated that there is a relationship between time in counseling and satisfaction with the counseling experience. The hypothesis was tested by Pearson Product-moment correlations between the number of sessions and the mean satisfaction score. A significant ($p<.05$) relationship was found for the Personal group, but not for the Educational-Career clients. There was also no significant relationship between the number of sessions attended and the mean satisfaction score for those clients who participated in group counseling. Table 5 shows the mean number of sessions for each group together with the standard deviations. The mean satisfaction score and standard deviation is also presented

for each group.

Insert Table 5 about here

A summary table of client responses to questions 7-25 of the CSAB is presented in Appendix C. Item 26, a free response item regarding other services or offices on campus thought to be most similar to the counseling operation, elicited 80 (39%) responses. The services listed most frequently were Faculty Advisor (20%) and Religious or Chaplin's Office (20%).

Item 27 asked, "Is there anything else you would like to tell us." Based on the author's subjective judgment there were 75 neutral responses, 16 negative responses, and nine positive responses.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that, on the whole, the clients of the Psychological and Counseling Center held favorable opinions and attitudes toward their counseling experiences. The mean satisfaction score for the total sample was 3.40 on a 5-point scale. However, a standard deviation of .789 indicates that there

was considerable variability across subjects. This finding is not surprising; other studies of client satisfaction have been virtually unanimous in demonstrating that clients like counseling.

Outcome research which reports only results obtained from gross, undifferentiated groups may mask significant aspects of the evaluation. Therefore in the present study the results were reported not only for the total sample, but also according to services received and the time period of return.

Clients received the questionnaire from nine to 21 months following termination of counseling. The length of the follow-up period helped to eliminate confounding variables such as the "halo effect" and the "hello-good bye effect." Several subjects indicated that forgetting had influenced their responses, however.

A limitation of the study was the questionnaire itself. Several comments concerning its appropriateness were found in the free response section. In addition, several questionnaires were returned by reading program participants with the notation that they had never been to the Center. When the second questionnaires were mailed (third mail out), the words "reading, study skills" were underlined in red. This misunderstanding and its later clarification may account for the

significantly slower rate of return by reading program participants. It also suggests a need to publicize and clarify the nature of the services offered by the counseling center.

With the current emphasis on the lay therapist and subdoctoral counselor, the role of the counseling psychologist is changing.

> Psychologists are, then, for various reasons, moving out of counseling. In addition to research, which, incidentally, is the only function still generally agreed upon for the doctorally trained psychologist, considerable emphasis is being placed upon consultation and supervision as functions of the counseling psychologist (Patterson, 1969, p. 26).

Thus, the finding of no difference in client satisfaction with differing levels of counselor training and experience not only supports the use of subdoctoral personnel as effective counselors, but also has important implications for the training of psychologists at the doctoral level as well as the Masters level. Preparation and training should be relevant to the goal toward which the student is working . The effect of the training experiences upon the individual is also of crucial importance, since several studies have shown that "...on those dimensions most highly related to constructive client change or gain, graduate programs may have deleterious effects upon the student (Carkhuff, 1968, p. 257)."

Although client satisfaction was found to be independent of the length of counseling for Educational-Career clients, a significant relationship was found to exist between client satisfaction and number of interviews for the Personal group. These findings are in agreement with Johnson's (1965) finding that there is a relationship between the number of interviews and success of counseling for those clients with Emotional problems, but not for those clients with Vocational problems.

When the results of this study are considered in the context of other research in this area, it appears that if a relationship exists between length of counseling and satisfaction or success, it is closely tied to the type of problem and the expectations which the client brings to counseling.

A possible explanation is that clients seeking Educational-Career counseling expect counseling to be "fact" oriented and short-term, while clients seeking help with personal problems expect counseling to be centered in self-exploration and rather long-term. It would follow that early leavers of personal counseling in some way were dissatisfied with their counseling experience or were threatened by continued self-disclosure. These findings suggest that when clients come seeking assistance with personal or psychological problems they and their counselors need to make a time commitment of more than a few sessions if client satisfaction is to result. The findings also suggest that meaningful outcome research must be conducted within a framework of diagnostic

category or type of service received.

Summary and Conclusions

The present study was conducted to assess client satisfaction with counseling services received for the purpose of improving services and meeting student needs. A follow-up questionnaire eliciting client reactions to his counselor and counseling experience was mailed to 349 clients who had received services from the Interuniversity Psychological and Counseling Center between September 1, 1968 and August 31, 1969. Results indicated that these clients generally were satisfied with their experiences. The mean satisfaction score for the total sample was 3.40 based on a 5-point scale. A standard deviation of .789 indicated considerable variability in response across clients.

When the total group of clients was divided into problem types, it was found that there were significant differences in the degree of satisfaction with their experience. Clients seeking help with personal problems were better satisfied than were those seeking assistance in career planning or improvement in reading and study skills.

When clients were grouped on the basis of the level of training and experience of their counselors, no significant differences in satisfaction were observed.

A significant relationship between level of satisfaction and length of time in counseling was found for clients with

personal problems, but not for clients seeking help with educational-career planning.

The experience of conducting this research leads to a strong recommendation for objective, standardized record-keeping procedures. The majority of the case records used in this study were loosely organized, unquantified, and inconsistent from one case to another. Records often did not seem adequate to serve clinical purposes and certainly were inadequate for research purposes. The task involves knowing what data to collect and how to collect it without becoming "record-bound."

In addition to their clinical value, systematic records provide a built-in empirical basis for improving counseling services and maintaining an ongoing program of research and evaluation. Such a continuing program is recommended to maintain the high quality of services presently available.

Table 1

Questionnaire Response for Three Time Periods

Period	Response		Satisfaction Score		Number of Responses		Correlation between Satisfaction Score and Number of Item Responses
	N	%	M	SD	M	SD	
1	52	25	3.54	.654	11.04	2.67	.016
2	57	28	3.40	.704	10.19	2.73	.160
3	98	47	3.33	.886	10.00	3.07	.066

Table 2

Analysis of Variance for Satisfaction and Period of Return

Group	Response		Return Period		Satisfaction Score		Mean Number of Item Responses	
	N	%	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Reading	70	34	2.40*	.76	3.24*	.85	8.73**	3.37
Career	32	15	1.97*	.88	3.30*	.83	10.31**	1.41
Personal	105	51	2.18*	.81	3.54*	.71	11.37**	2.29

*p<.05
**p<.001

Table 3

Means, Standard Deviations, and Tests of Significance for Satisfaction Scores and Number of Item Responses

Group	Response		Satisfaction Score		Number of Responses		Correlation between Satisfaction and Number of Responses
	N	%	M	SD	M	SD	
Total	207	100	3.40	.789	10.31	2.91	.092
Reading	70	34	3.24	.848	8.73	3.37	-0.003
Counseling	137	66	3.49	.744	11.12	2.25	.078
Ed.-Career	32	15	3.30	.828	10.31	1.91	.039
Personal	105	51	3.54	.707	11.37	2.29	.056

Table 4

Analysis of Variance for Satisfaction and Training of Counselor

Counselor	N	Clients Seen	Satisfaction Score	
			M	SD
Practicum Student	11	22	3.45	.50
Counseling Fellow	4	59	3.47	.76
Intern	2	13	3.44	.70
Professional Staff	5	42	3.57	.82

Table 5

Mean Satisfaction by Number of Sessions for Specified Groups

Group	Number of Sessions		Satisfaction Score		Correlation between Sessions and Satisfaction
	M	SD	M	SD	
Career	3.97	5.50	3.30	.84	-.124
Personal	9.29	14.70	3.56	.71	.227*
Counseling (Career & Personal)	7.92	13.19	3.51	.75	.220*
Group	8.76	6.51	3.48	.58	.013

*$p < .05$

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